DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 484 RC 020 323

AUTHOR Warner, Linda Sue; Brown, Dennis
TITLE Cognitive and Cultural Constructions: The First Year Experience.
PUB DATE Jul 95
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the International Conference "The First Year Experience" (8th, York, England, United Kingdom, July 11-15, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Education; American Indians; *Cognitive Processes; *College Freshmen; Colleges; Culturally Relevant Education; Culture Conflict; Educational Strategies; Higher Education; Models; Schemata (Cognition); *Student Adjustment; Student Alienation; Student College Relationship; Tribally Controlled Education
IDENTIFIERS *Haskell Indian Nations University KS

ABSTRACT

The first-year experiences of minority-group college students are often highly stressful and may influence decisions about remaining in college. M. R. Louis' model of meaning and sense-making provides a framework for examining the experiences of American Indian college freshmen and for evaluating interventions aimed at lowering student attrition at tribally controlled colleges. The model describes the process by which individuals in new situations encounter, respond to, and reinterpret "surprises," experiences that differ from what was anticipated or assumed. Five types of surprises are outlined: conscious expectations, self-expectations, unanticipated features, internal reactions, and cultural assumptions. Until recently, all federal Indian education policies aimed at assimilation of Indian children into White culture. Begun in 1968, tribally controlled community colleges have greatly increased Indian postsecondary participation and graduation rates by permitting students to maintain a cultural base in their home communities. At Haskell Indian Nations University, a federally operated college with 100 percent American Indian and Alaska Native enrollment, faculty and staff have instituted a variety of structural and curricular changes aimed at highlighting the relevancy of students' cultures and values. Such strategies narrow the gap between students' expectations and the realities of the freshman year and increase the likelihood that students will assign appropriate meanings to surprises. (SV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 389 484

Cognitive and Cultural Constructions:

The First Year Experience

Linda Sue Warner

The Pennsylvania State University

Dennis Brown

The University of Kansas

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Linda Sue Warner

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Paper presented at the Eighth International Conference

The First-Year Experience

July 11-15, 1995

University of York, York: England

Rc 020323

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

Using examples from tribally controlled community colleges, specifically Haskell Indian Nations University, the authors propose that student attrition behaviors are a result of the cognitive and cultural constructions students create during this period of transition. Models for integrating student retention are discussed through the cultural context of the students.

Strategies for retention of American Indian/Alaska Native students were analyzed using M. R. Louis' (1980) Meaning and Sensemaking Model. Louis' sensemaking model describes the process by which individuals detect and interpret surprises.

Linda Sue Warner, Ph.D.
Director,
American Indian Education Policy Center
The Pennsylvania State University
814-863-1626
ashh@taos.arc.unm.edu

Dennis Brown, Ph.D.
Assistant Dean
Undergraduate Studies
The University of Kansas
913-864-4401
denbrown@falcon.cc.ukans.edu

Cognitive and Cultural Constructions: The First Year Experience

Introduction

The first year experiences of minority students are often highly stress-filled and provide us with some evidence that these experiences are the foundation for decisions about remaining in college. The authors evaluate the use of Louis' Sensemaking Model (1980) in the context of culturally specific events which serve to moderate the types and amount of "surprise" which freshmen students encounter. Further, they propose an active research agenda to evaluate the success of specific programs.

Louis' Meaning and Sensemaking Model

Louis' sensemaking model describes the processes by which individuals detect and interpret surprises. The model consists of a cycle of sequence of events occurring over time. The cycle is initiated when individuals form unconscious and unanticipated assumptions which serve as predictors about future events. When a person encounters events which are discrepant from the predictors (surprises), a reprocessing of interpretation of meaning is triggered. Based on the immediate attributed meaning of the surprise, a behavioral response is selected. Interpretations and meanings of the actors, actions and environment are reprocessed and predictions about similar future experiences are updated (alteration of script/schema). Meaning is assigned to the surprise as a result of the sensemaking process, after the response to the surprise.

A number of inputs are active during the sensemaking process which attributes meaning to surprise. These inputs include: other's interpretation, local interpretation schema (cultural assumptions and internalized context specific dictionaries of meaning), predisposition and purpose, and past experience (p. 241). It is evident within the sensemaking processes that minority students often lack access to the other's interpretation and local interpretation schema. As a result, freshmen, particularly minority students, will often interpret surprises in the new setting based on inappropriate past experience schema. Responses to these surprises, then, are based on inappropriate meaning attached to the surprise. Lack of access to others' interpretations further removes the student from "reality testing" of a new interpretive meaning. Thus, sensemaking outcomes can neither be validated or reinterpreted appropriately for the students. Hence, feeling of low commitment and alienation (lack of fit and integration) may result.

In order to use the Louis model as a framework for discussion of specific interventions at Haskell Indian Nations University, it is necessary to have a general awareness of American Indian education policies and the history of this institution.

American Indian Higher Education

Despite years of federal control over American Indian affairs, government officials have been slow to understand American Indian people and their cultures. In fact, only recently have federal authorities recognized that American Indians are a diverse people of many different tribal groups, each with unique and complex cultures and histories.

In the past, United States government officials considered the diversity among the over 500 contemporary American Indian tribal groups as an obstacle to be overcome, and,

federal education policy, predictably, reflected this perspective. Education for Indian children mean "assimilation" into white culture, with no attempt to retain Indian value systems or beliefs (Whiteman, 1986). It is against this background that all federal education policies have been developed, funded, and prioritized.

With the passage of the Indian Education Act in 1972, the U.S. Congress demonstrated that it could learn from the mistakes of the past and use this knowledge in building a foundation for the future. The most essential element in this foundation is the recognition of the necessity for Native participation in the control of Native education. The treaty guarantee of Native self government means that it is the American Indian and Alaska Native conceptualization of education that must guide the future course of Native Education (King, 1993; p. 1).

Tribally Controlled Junior Colleges

American Indian higher education--like many other Indian institutions--is dependent on the federal government for funding. This dependence on federal funding is rooted in history and based on court decisions, the plenary power of Congress, and treaties between the federal government and American Indian representatives.

Before the 1960s, only three American Indian higher education institutions were receiving federal support. Of the three Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas (now Haskell Indian Nations University) is the oldest. Since 1968, these institutions have been joined by an entirely new category of college: the tribally controlled community college. The establishment of Navajo Community College at Tsaile, Navajo Nation (1968) and Sinte Gleska University on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in 1971 marked the birth of a

community college movement in Indian country that has successfully lowered the extremely high postsecondary dropout rate among tribal students.

The establishment of tribally controlled colleges turned Indian education policies almost completely around. Tribal colleges gave Indian students institutions located close to home that would address the problems of high dropout rates. Faculty from the tribal colleges began developing curriculum from an Indian cultural perspective, and they based much of the tribal community college curriculum on the respective cultures of the students.

The community-based colleges also helped ease the problems of inadequate financial aid. The geographic location of many tribal colleges also helped ease problems of cultural isolation, even, in the process, addressing family and kinship problems (Bordeaux, 1990). Tribal colleges gave Indian students the option of obtaining a postsecondary education and, at the same time, maintaining a cultural base in their communities.

Indian community leaders report that Indian controlled community colleges have provided access to postsecondary education for students who otherwise would not have been able to attend and graduate. Over the past twenty years, the tribal colleges have experienced increases in both American Indian student enrollments and graduation rates. By any statistical measure, tribal colleges are succeeding admirably (Warner, 1992).

In 1990, approximately 12,000 American Indian students, representing 60 per cent of the American Indian population in higher education attended locally controlled tribal colleges (Bordeaux, 1990), one indication that the preservation of Indian cultures through education remains a high priority for Indian people.

Although the meaning constructs and sensemaking processes approach may appear to be a simplistic distinction from institutional and developmental literature, it represents a significant shift in student retention strategies. Rather than concentrating on managing the environment, institutions need to focus on managing the meaning of the freshman experience. Retention strategies should focus on facilitating the freshman's interpretation and sensemaking processes.

For American Indian higher education to excel beyond the successes of Indian community colleges, four-year institutions must respect the diversity of the nation's 500+ Indian tribes. One way that this may be accomplished is through the development and implementation of a new standard for American Indian higher education. That standard simply stated, would include both two-and four- year institutions and would incorporate research and curriculum from American Indian scholars.

Haskell Indian Nations University

Although it has always been a school for American Indian/Alaskan Natives, Haskell's educational purposes, until quite recently were the result of the federal policies of assimilation. Federal policies in the United States have historically diminished the role of indigenous cultural values in education. Federal policies also ignored the cultural diversity of the tribes and tribal people, suppressed the learning and use of tribal languages, and failed to recognize values, beliefs, and practices in federally financed schools. Haskell typically enrolls representatives of at least 100 nations each semester, yet this asset was largely ignored in curriculum development and social services.

When Haskell opened in 1884 as the United States Indian Industrial Training School, it offered courses in farming and homemaking. Trades for males included

tailoring, wagon-making, harness-making, painting and shoe-making. Homemaking training for females involved studies in cooking, sewing and domestic service. A business department was added in 1895.

In 1927, Haskell added a secondary curriculum and began offering post-secondary courses. In the 1950s, federal policies mandated the assimilation of American Indians/Alaska Natives under "relocation" programs which have been described as "Learn to Earn." Industrial training became a large part of the curriculum and by 1935 Haskell had evolved into a post-high school vocation-technical institution. In 1970, Haskell changed from a comprehensive vocational-technical institute to a comprehensive junior college. Since the late 1970s, Haskell has been influenced, as were the tribally controlled colleges, by policies of self-determination.

In 1993, the Board of Regents changed the name to Haskell Indian Nations University in order to reflect the vision to become a baccalaureate degree granting institution while seeking to become a national center for American Indian education, cultural experiences, and research that will add to the knowledge and support for all of American Indian education in the United States. (Self-Study, 1993).

Haskell has an average enrollment of over 900 students each semester. These students represent tribes from across the United States. In the fall of 1994, over 125 tribes from 40 states were represented in the student population. Haskell is only one of two federally operated colleges in the United States with a hundred percent American Indian/Alaska Native enrollment on its campus. Currently there are 61 faculty members, of which thirty are American Indian. One third of the American Indian faculty at Haskell are alumni.

Haskell is located near the geographic center of the nation in Lawrence, Kansas. The campus occupies 320 acres of land and in 1961 was designated a national landmark by the United States Department of Interior. It is accredited by North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and belongs to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium.

Sensemaking Strategies at Haskell

In order to understand attrition behaviors for beginning freshmen, we propose a discussion of the process of how experiences are interpreted and how meanings are ascribed. Louis (1980) proposes that change, contrast, and surprise are major features in the entry experience. Change is an objective difference between the old setting and the new setting. The greater the number of differences in the "changing to" context (e.g. role, identity, status, environment), the more adaptation is required of the individual. Change is publicly notable and knowable in advance.

Contrast is person-specific and "involves the emergence within a perceptual field of "features" which are distinctive from previous experiences (p.236). The features that emerge and are noticed depend upon those features of previously experienced settings. For example, a freshmen may experience contrast as a distinct difference in the way college students dress contrasted to high school students. Experience served as a reference point for interpretation which contrasts with current experience. Inherent in contrast is the process of "letting go" of old roles, replacing old reference points with new ones. Experiences in the old roles are merged into the new roles. Thus, contrast represents subjective differences between old and new experiences and serves to define the new setting.

Surprise represents a difference between an individual's anticipation's and subsequent experience in the new setting. Surprise may be pleasant or unpleasant; however, each surprise requires adaptation. There are five forms of surprise which may arise during the encounter state when adaptation is required.

Surprise Matrix

FORMS	REACTIONS
Conscious expectations	**Met or Unmet**
Self-expectations	**Met or Unmet**
Unanticipated Features	**Met**
Internal Reactions	**Expectations**
Cultural Assumptions	**Failure**

The first form of surprise arises when conscious expectations about college are not met or are undermet.

The second form of surprise occurs when self-expectations are unmet. This form of surprise is characterized by the student's self-assessment of skills, values, and needs.

The third form of surprise is encountered when unconscious or unanticipated features of the experience are unmet. In this form, features previously not considered important in the experience emerge and become important to the freshman.

The fourth form of surprise is the difficulty in accurately forecasting one's internal reaction to a new experience. "How the new experience feels as opposed to how the individual expected it to feel, is difficult to anticipate and often a surprise" (p. 238).

The fifth form of surprise occurs from cultural assumptions the freshman makes. Specifically, cultural assumptions derived from previous experiences may provide inappropriate operating guidelines in the context of the new experience/s. The cultural assumptions fail and produce surprise.

In order to mitigate the extremely high drop out rates of first semester freshmen, the tribally controlled community colleges in this country have strategically focused on the elimination of the causes of stress which produce surprise in their freshman population. Specifically, they have sought to "redo" the assimilation policies of higher education and to eliminate the opportunity for surprise. We do not suggest that tribal colleges, including Haskell, have used Louis' sensemaking model to build these strategies. We do suggest that the model is a useful tool in the evaluating their success. By highlighting the relevancy of the students' cultures and values, these programs have sought to provide linkages between past experiences and the freshman year. Successful retention rates and higher graduation rates in the past five years in these institutions have alerted us to the need to critically evaluate the reform efforts in these communities.

The following examples of structural and curricular change are based on the cultural assumptions made by the faculty and staff at Haskell.

- Teaching culture in the context of the U.S. and world diversity.
- Recognizing interpersonal relations, including family structures, extended families, clan systems, the roles and responsibilities of relatives, and the importance of elders.
- Highlighting experiential activities, including Talking Circles and other values based approaches

- Recognizing and understanding of the importance of respect for nonverbal behaviors, e.g. eye contact; in-law relationships; kinship terms.
- Assessing the sociological implications of human sexuality, wellness and illness prevention
- Increasing knowledge of Indian history, literature, philosophy and contributions to the scholarly world as well as to the physical world
- Defining sovereignty issues as the basis of Indian identity.
- Promoting/engaging the community as part of a total learning environment
- Articulating the values of Indian cultures and apply them to lifelong learning

These examples clearly indicate that the faculty and staff are responding to the needs of students to incorporate cultural assumptions into all aspects of the university. This incorporation will narrow the gap between expectations and will allow the student the repertoire to assign appropriate meaning to a surprise. These skills will insure integration into the college setting and, in this example, have produced significant success.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, in 1744, the commissioners of the government of Virginia offered to educate six sons of the chiefs of the Six Nations. The recorded reply (Adams, 1974) they received was:

> Several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your science; but when they came back to us, they were bad runners; ignorant of every means of living in the woods; unable to bear either cold or hunger; knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy; spoke our language imperfectly; were therefore neither fit for hunters,

warriors, or counselors, they were totally good for nothing. We are, however, not the less obliged by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it; and to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take great care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.

References

Adams, D. (1974). Self-determination and Indian education. in American Indian Education. Arizona State University: Tempe, AZ.

Bordeaux, L. (1990). This is the way it must be. Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher education, 2 (2), 8-10.

King, G. L. (1993). Haskell Indian Nations University: Elementary Teacher Education Program. Haskell Press.

Haskell Indian Nations University. (1993). Elementary Teacher Education Program: Self-Study. Haskell Press.

Louis, Meryl Reis. (1980). "Surprise and Sensemaking: What newcomers experience in entering unfamiliar organizational settings. Administrative Science Quarterly. 25, 226-257.

Warner, L. S. (1992). The emergence of American Indian higher education. Thought and Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal. 8 (1), 61-72.

Whiteman, H. (1986). Historical review of Indian education: Cultural policies--United States Position. Wicazo Sa Review, 2 (1), 27-31.